`On a blustery spring Thursday, just after midterms, I went out

for noodles with Alex and Eugene, two undergraduates at

New York University, to talk about how they use artificial intelligence in their schoolwork. When I first met Alex, last year,

he was interested in a career in the arts, and he devoted a lot of his free time to photo shoots with his friends. But he had recently

decided on a more practical path: he wanted to become a C.P.A.

His Thursdays were busy, and he had forty-five minutes until a

study session for an accounting class. He stowed his skateboard

under a bench in the restaurant and shook his laptop out of his bag, connecting to the internet before we sat down.

Alex has wavy hair and speaks with the chill, singsong cadence of someone who has spent a lot of time in the Bay Area. He and Eugene scanned the menu, and Alex said that they should get clear broth, rather than spicy, “so we can both lock in our skin care.” Weeks earlier, when I’d messaged Alex, he had said that everyone he knew used ChatGPT in some fashion, but that he used it only for organizing his notes. In person, he admitted that this wasn’t remotely accurate. “Any type of writing in life, I use A.I.,” he said. He relied on Claude for research, DeepSeek for reasoning and explanation, and Gemini for image generation. ChatGPT served

more general needs. “I need A.I. to text girls,” he joked, imagining an A.I.-enhanced version of Hinge. I asked if he had used A.I. when setting up our meeting. He laughed, and then replied, “Honestly, yeah. I’m not tryin’ to type all that. Could you tell?”

OpenAI released ChatGPT on November 30, 2022. Six days later, Sam Altman, the C.E.O., announced that it had reached a million users. Large language models like ChatGPT don’t “think” in the human sense—when you ask ChatGPT a question, it draws from the data sets it has been trained on and builds an answer based on predictable word patterns. Companies had experimented with A.I.-driven chatbots for years, but most sputtered upon release; Microsoft’s 2016 experiment with a bot named Tay was shut

down after sixteen hours because it began spouting racist rhetoric

and denying the Holocaust. But ChatGPT seemed different. It

could hold a conversation and break complex ideas down into

easy-to-follow steps. Within a month, Google’s management,

fearful that A.I. would have an impact on its search-engine

business, declared a “code red.”

Among educators, an even greater panic arose. It was too deep

into the school term to implement a coherent policy for what

seemed like a homework killer: in seconds, ChatGPT could collect and summarize research and draft a full essay. Many large

campuses tried to regulate ChatGPT and its eventual competitors, mostly in vain. I asked Alex to show me an example of an A.I.-produced paper. Eugene wanted to see it, too. He used a different

A.I. app to help with computations for his business classes, but he

had never gotten the hang of using it for writing. “I got you,”

Alex told him. (All the students I spoke with are identified by pseudonyms.)

He opened Claude on his laptop. I noticed a chat that mentioned abolition. “We had to read Robert Wedderburn for a class,” he explained, referring to the nineteenth-century Jamaican abolitionist. “But, obviously, I wasn’t tryin’ to read that.” He had prompted Claude for a summary, but it was too long for him to read in the ten minutes he had before class started. He told me, “I said, ‘Turn it into concise bullet points.’ ” He then transcribed Claude’s points in his notebook, since his professor ran a screen-free classroom.

Alex searched until he found a paper for an art-history class,

about a museum exhibition. He had gone to the show, taken photographs of the images and the accompanying wall text, and

then uploaded them to Claude, asking it to generate a paper

according to the professor’s instructions. “I’m trying to do the

least work possible, because this is a class I’m not hella fucking with,” he said. After skimming the essay, he felt that the A.I.

hadn’t sufficiently addressed the professor’s questions, so he

refined the prompt and told it to try again. In the end, Alex’s submission received the equivalent of an A-minus. He said that

he had a basic grasp of the paper’s argument, but that if the

professor had asked him for specifics he’d have been “so fucked.”

I read the paper over Alex’s shoulder; it was a solid imitation of

how an undergraduate might describe a set of images. If this had

been 2007, I wouldn’t have made much of its generic tone, or of

the precise, box-ticking quality of its critical observations.

Eugene, serious and somewhat solemn, had been listening with bemusement. “I would not cut and paste like he did, because I’m

a lot more paranoid,” he said. He’s a couple of years younger than Alex and was in high school when ChatGPT was released. At the time, he experimented with A.I. for essays but noticed that it made easily

noticed errors. “This passed the A.I. detector?” he asked

Alex.

When ChatGPT launched, instructors adopted various measures

to insure that students’ work was their own. These included

requiring them to share time-stamped version histories of their

Google documents, and designing written assignments that had

to be completed in person, over multiple sessions. But most

detective work occurs after submission. Services like GPTZero, Copyleaks, and Originality.ai analyze the structure and syntax of

a piece of writing and assess the likelihood that it was produced by

a machine. Alex said that his art-history professor was “hella old,” and therefore probably didn’t know about such programs. We fed

the paper into a few different A.I.-detection websites. One said

there was a twenty-eight-per-cent chance that the paper was A.I.-generated; another put the odds at sixty-one per cent. “That’s better than I expected,” Eugene said.

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I asked if he thought what his friend had done was cheating, and

Alex interrupted: “Of course. Are you fucking kidding me?”

As we looked at Alex’s laptop, I noticed that he had recently asked ChatGPT whether it was O.K. to go running in Nike Dunks. He had concluded that ChatGPT made for the best confidant. He consulted

it as one might a therapist, asking for tips on dating and on how to stay motivated during dark times. His ChatGPT sidebar was an index of the highs and lows of being a young person. He admitted to me

and Eugene that he’d used ChatGPT to draft his application to N.Y.U.—our lunch might never have happened had it not been for A.I. “I guess it’s really dishonest, but, fuck it, I’m here,” he said.

“It’s cheating, but I don’t think it’s, like, *cheating*,” Eugene said.

He saw Alex’s art-history essay as a victimless crime. He was

just fulfilling requirements, not training to become a literary

scholar.

Alex had to rush off to his study session. I told Eugene that our conversation had made me wonder about my function as a

professor. He asked if I taught English, and I nodded.

“Mm, O.K.,” he said, and laughed. “So you’re, like, majorly affected.”

Iteach at a small liberal-arts college, and I often joke that a

student is more likely to hand in a big paper a year late

(as recently happened) than to take a dishonorable shortcut. My classes are small and intimate, driven by processes and

pedagogical modes, like letting awkward silences linger, that are difficult to scale. As a result, I have always had a vague sense

that my students are learning *something*, even when it is hard to quantify. In the past, if I was worried that a paper had been plagiarized, I would enter a few phrases from it into a search

engine and call it due diligence. But I recently began noticing

that some students’ writing seemed out of synch with how they expressed themselves in the classroom. One essay felt stitched together from two minds—half of it was polished and rote, the

other intimate and unfiltered. Having never articulated a policy

for A.I., I took the easy way out. The student had had enough

shame to write half of the essay, and I focussed my feedback on improving that part.

It’s easy to get hung up on stories of academic dishonesty. Late

last year, in a survey of college and university leaders, fifty-nine

per cent reported an increase in cheating, a figure that feels conservative when you talk to students. A.I. has returned us to

the question of what the point of higher education is. Until we're eighteen, we go to school because we have to, studying the

Second World War and reducing fractions while undergoing a

process of socialization. We're essentially learning how to

follow rules. College, however, is a choice, and it has always

involved the tacit agreement that students will fulfill a set of

tasks, sometimes pertaining to subjects they find pointless or impractical, and then receive some kind of credential. But even

for the most mercenary of students, the pursuit of a grade or a diploma has come with an ancillary benefit. You're being taught

how to do something difficult, and maybe, along the way, you

come to appreciate the process of learning. But the arrival of

A.I. means that you can now bypass the process, and the

difficulty, altogether.

There are no reliable figures for how many American students

use A.I., just stories about how everyone is doing it. A 2024 Pew Research Center survey of students between the ages of thirteen

and seventeen suggests that a quarter of teens currently use

ChatGPT for schoolwork, double the figure from 2023. OpenAI recently released a report claiming that one in three college

students uses its products. There’s good reason to believe that

these are low estimates. If you grew up Googling everything or

using Grammarly to give your prose a professional gloss, it isn’t

far-fetched to regard A.I. as just another productivity tool. “I see it

as no different from Google,” Eugene said. “I use it for the same

kind of purpose.”

Being a student is about testing boundaries and staying one step

ahead of the rules. While administrators and educators have been debating new definitions for cheating and discussing the mechanics

of surveillance, students have been embracing the possibilities of

A.I. A few months after the release of ChatGPT, a Harvard undergraduate got approval to conduct an experiment in which

it wrote papers that had been assigned in seven courses. The A.I. skated by with a 3.57 G.P.A., a little below the school's average. Upstart companies introduced products that specialized in "humanizing" A.I.-generated writing, and TikTok influencers

began coaching their audiences on how to avoid detection.

Unable to keep pace, academic administrations largely stopped

trying to control students' use of artificial intelligence and

adopted an attitude of hopeful resignation, encouraging teachers to explore the practical, pedagogical applications of A.I. In certain fields, this wasn't a huge stretch. Studies show that A.I. is

particularly effective in helping non-native speakers acclimate to college-level writing in English. In some STEM classes, using generative A.I. as a tool is acceptable. Alex and Eugene told me

that their accounting professor encouraged them to take advantage

of free offers on new A.I. products available only to

undergraduates, as companies competed for student loyalty throughout the spring. In May, OpenAI announced ChatGPT Edu,

a product specifically marketed for educational use, after schools including Oxford University, Arizona State University, and the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business experimented with incorporating A.I. into their curricula. This

month, the company detailed plans to integrate ChatGPT into

every dimension of campus life, with students receiving "personalized" A.I. accounts to accompany them throughout

their years in college.

But for English departments, and for college writing in general,

the arrival of A.I. has been more vexed. Why bother teaching

writing now? The future of the midterm essay may be a quaint

worry compared with larger questions about the ramifications of artificial intelligence, such as its effect on the environment, or the automation of jobs. And yet has there ever been a time in human history when writing was so important to the average person? E-mails, texts, social-media posts, angry missives in comments

sections, customer-service chats—let alone one's actual work. The way we write shapes our thinking. We process the world through

the composition of text dozens of times a day, in what the literary scholar Deborah Brandt calls our era of “mass writing.” It’s

possible that the ability to write original and interesting sentences

will become only more important in a future where everyone has access to the same A.I. assistants.

Corey Robin, a writer and a professor of political science at

Brooklyn College, read the early stories about ChatGPT with skepticism. Then his daughter, a sophomore in high school at

the time, used it to produce an essay that was about as good as

those his undergraduates wrote after a semester of work. He

decided to stop assigning take-home essays. For the first time

in his thirty years of teaching, he administered in-class exams.

Robin told me he finds many of the steps that universities have

taken to combat A.I. essays to be “hand-holding that’s not

leading people anywhere.” He has become a believer in the

passage-identification blue-book exam, in which students name

and contextualize excerpts of what they've read for class. "Know

the text and write about it intelligently," he said. "That was a

way of honoring their autonomy without being a cop."

His daughter, who is now a senior, complains that her teachers

rarely assign full books. And Robin has noticed that college

students are more comfortable with excerpts than with entire

articles, and prefer short stories to novels. "I don't get the sense

they have the kind of literary or cultural mastery that used to be

the assumption upon which we assigned papers," he said. One

study, published last year, found that fifty-eight per cent of

students at two Midwestern universities had so much trouble interpreting the opening paragraphs of "Bleak House," by Charles Dickens, that "they would not be able to read the novel on

their own." And these were English majors.

The return to pen and paper has been a common response to A.I. among professors, with sales of blue books rising significantly at certain universities in the past two years. Siva Vaidhyanathan, a professor of

media studies at the University of Virginia, grew dispirited after some students submitted what he suspected was

A.I.-generated work for an assignment on how the school's honor code should view A.I.-generated work. He, too, has decided to

return to blue books, and is pondering the logistics of oral exams. "Maybe we go all the way back to 450 B.C.," he told me.

But other professors have renewed their emphasis on getting

students to see the value of process. Dan Melzer, the director of

the first-year composition program at the University of California, Davis, recalled that "everyone was in a panic" when ChatGPT

first hit. Melzer's job is to think about how writing functions

across the curriculum so that all students, from prospective

scientists to future lawyers, get a chance to hone their prose. Consequently, he has an accommodating view of how norms

around communication have changed, especially in the internet

age. He was sympathetic to kids who viewed some of their assignments as dull and mechanical and turned to ChatGPT to expedite the process. He called the five-paragraph essay—the

classic “hamburger” structure, consisting of an introduction,

three supporting body paragraphs, and a conclusion —“outdated,” having descended from élitist traditions.

Melzer believes that some students loathe writing because of

how it’s been taught, particularly in the past twenty-five years.

The No Child Left Behind Act, from 2002, instituted standards-

based reforms across all public schools, resulting in generations

of students being taught to write according to rigid testing rubrics.

As one teacher wrote in the Washington *Post* in 2013, students excelled when they mastered a form of “bad writing.” Melzer has designed workshops that treat writing as a deliberative, iterative process involving drafting, feedback (from peers and also from ChatGPT), and revision.

“If you assign a generic essay topic and don’t engage in any

process, and you just collect it a month later, it’s almost like

you’re creating an environment tailored to crime,” he said.

“You’re encouraging crime in your community!”

I found Melzer’s pedagogical approach inspiring; I instantly

felt bad for routinely breaking my class into small groups so

that they could “workshop” their essays, as though the meaning of this verb were intuitively clear. But, as a student, I’d have found Melzer’s focus on process tedious—it requires a measure of faith

that all the work will pay off in the end. Writing is hard, regardless of whether it’s a five-paragraph essay or a haiku, and it’s natural, especially when you’re a college student, to want to avoid hard work—this is why classes like Melzer’s are compulsory. “You

can imagine that students really want to be there,” he joked.

College is all about opportunity costs. One way of viewing A.I.

is as an intervention in how people choose to spend their time.

In the early nineteen-sixties, college students spent an estimated twenty-four hours a week on schoolwork. Today, that figure is

about fifteen, a sign, to critics of contemporary higher education,

that young people are beneficiaries of grade inflation—in a

survey conducted by the *Harvard Crimson*, nearly eighty per

cent of the class of 2024 reported a G.P.A. of 3.7 or higher—

and lack the diligence of their forebears. I don’t know how

many hours I spent on schoolwork in the late nineties, when I

was in college, but I recall feeling that there was never enough

time. I suspect that, even if today’s students spend less time

studying, they don’t feel significantly less stressed. It’s the nature

of campus life that everyone assimilates into a culture of busyness, and a lot of that anxiety has been shifted to extracurricular or pre-professional pursuits. A dean at Harvard remarked that students

feel compelled to find distinction outside the classroom because

they are largely indistinguishable within it.

Eddie, a sociology major at Long Beach State, is older than most

of his classmates. He graduated high school in 2010, and worked

full time while attending a community college. “I’ve gone through

a lot to be at school,” he told me. “I want to learn as much as

I can.” ChatGPT, which his therapist recommended to him, was ubiquitous at Long Beach even before the California State

University system, which Long Beach is a part of, announced a partnership with OpenAI, giving its four hundred and sixty

thousand students access to ChatGPT Edu. “I was a little

suspicious of how convenient it was,” Eddie said. “It seemed

to know a lot, in a way that seemed so *human*.”

He told me that he used A.I. “as a brainstorm” but never for

writing itself. “I limit myself, for sure.” Eddie works for

Los Angeles County, and he was talking to me during a break.

He admitted that, when he was pressed for time, he would

sometimes use ChatGPT for quizzes. “I don’t know if I’m

telling myself a lie,” he said. “I’ve given myself opportunities

to do things ethically, but if I’m rushing to work I don’t feel

bad about that,” particularly for courses outside his major.

I recognized Eddie’s conflict. I’ve used ChatGPT a handful of

times, and on one occasion it accomplished a scheduling task

so quickly that I began to understand the intoxication of hyper-efficiency. I’ve felt the need to stop myself from indulging in

idle queries. Almost all the students I interviewed in the past

few months described the same trajectory: from using A.I. to

assist with organizing their thoughts to off-loading their thinking altogether. For some, it became something akin to social media, constantly open in the corner of the screen, a portal for distraction. This wasn’t like paying someone to write a paper for you—there

was no social friction, no aura of illicit activity. Nor did it feel like sharing notes, or like passing off what you’d read in CliffsNotes or SparkNotes as your own analysis. There was no real time to reflect

on questions of originality or honesty—the student basically

became a project manager. And for students who use it the way

Eddie did, as a kind of sounding board, there’s no clear threshold where the work ceases to be an original piece of thinking. In April, Anthropic, the company behind Claude, released a report drawn

from a million anonymized student conversations with its chatbots.

It suggested that more than half of user interactions could be classified as “collaborative,” involving a dialogue between

student and A.I. (Presumably, the rest of the interactions were

more extractive.)

May, a sophomore at Georgetown, was initially resistant to

using ChatGPT. “I don’t know if it was an ethics thing,” she

said. “I just thought I could do the assignment better, and it

wasn’t worth the time being saved.” But she began using it to proofread her essays, and then to generate cover letters, and

now she uses it for “pretty much all” her classes. “I don’t think

it’s made me a worse writer,” she said. “It’s perhaps made me

a less patient writer. I used to spend hours writing essays,

nitpicking over my wording, really thinking about how to

phrase things.” College had made her reflect on her experience

at an extremely competitive high school, where she had received

top grades but retained very little knowledge. As a result, she

was the rare student who found college somewhat relaxed.

ChatGPT helped her breeze through busywork and deepen her engagement with the courses she felt passionate about.

“I was trying to think, Where’s all this time going?” she said.

I had never envied a college student until she told me the answer:

“I sleep more now.”

Harry Stecopoulos oversees the University of Iowa’s English department, which has more than eight hundred majors. On the

first day of his introductory course, he asks students to write by

hand a two-hundred-word analysis of the opening paragraph of

Ralph Ellison’s “Invisible Man.” There are always a few grumbles, and students have occasionally walked out. “I like the exercise

as a tone-setter, because it stresses their writing,” he told me.

The return of blue-book exams might disadvantage students who

were encouraged to master typing at a young age. Once you've

grown accustomed to the smooth rhythms of typing, reverting to

a pen and paper can feel stifling. But neuroscientists have found

that the "embodied experience" of writing by hand taps into parts

of the brain that typing does not. Being able to write one way—

even if it's more efficient—doesn't make the other way obsolete. There's something lofty about Stecopoulos's opening-day

exercise. But there's another reason for it: the handwritten

paragraph also begins a paper trail, attesting to voice and style,

that a teaching assistant can consult if a suspicious paper is

submitted.

Kevin, a third-year student at Syracuse University, recalled that,

on the first day of a class, the professor had asked everyone to compose some thoughts by hand. "That brought a smile to my

face," Kevin said. "The other kids are scratching their necks and sweating, and I'm, like, This is kind of nice."

Kevin had worked as a teaching assistant for a mandatory

course that first-year students take to acclimate to campus life. Writing assignments involved basic questions about students' backgrounds, he told me, but they often used A.I. anyway.

"I was very disturbed," he said. He occasionally uses A.I. to help

with translations for his advanced Arabic course, but he's come

to look down on those who rely heavily on it. "They almost

forget that they have the ability to think," he said. Like many

former holdouts, Kevin felt that his judicious use of A.I. was

more defensible than his peers' use of it.

As ChatGPT begins to sound more human, will we reconsider

what it means to sound like ourselves? Kevin and some of his

friends pride themselves on having an ear attuned to A.I.-

generated text. The hallmarks, he said, include a preponderance

of em dashes and a voice that feels blandly objective. An acquaintance had run an essay that she had written herself through

a detector, because she worried that she was starting to phrase

things like ChatGPT did. He read her essay: “I realized, like, It

does kind of sound like ChatGPT. It was freaking me out a little

bit.”

A particularly disarming aspect of ChatGPT is that, if you point

out a mistake, it communicates in the backpedalling tone of a

contrite student. (“Apologies for the earlier confusion. . . .”)

Its mistakes are often referred to as hallucinations, a description

that seems to anthropomorphize A.I., conjuring a vision of a

sleep-deprived assistant. Some professors told me that they

had students fact-check ChatGPT’s work, as a way of discussing

the importance of original research and of showing the

machine’s fallibility. Hallucination rates have grown worse

for most A.I.s, with no single reason for the increase. As a

researcher told the *Times*, “We still don’t know how these

models work exactly.”

But many students claim to be unbothered by A.I.’s mistakes.

They appear nonchalant about the question of achievement, and

even dissociated from their work, since it is only notionally

theirs. Joseph, a Division I athlete at a Big Ten school, told me

that he saw no issue with using ChatGPT for his classes, but he

did make one exception: he wanted to experience his African-literature course “authentically,” because it involved his heritage. Alex, the N.Y.U. student, said that if one of his A.I. papers

received a subpar grade his disappointment would be focussed

on the fact that he’d spent twenty dollars on his subscription.

August, a sophomore at Columbia studying computer science,

told me about a class where she was required to compose a short lecture on a topic of her choosing. “It was a class where everyone

was guaranteed an A, so I just put it in and I maybe edited like

two words and submitted it," she said. Her professor identified

her essay as exemplary work, and she was asked to read from it

to a class of two hundred students. "I was a little nervous," she

said. But then she realized, "If they don't like it, it wasn't me

who wrote it, you know?"

Kevin, by contrast, desired a more general kind of moral

distinction. I asked if he would be bothered to receive a lower

grade on an essay than a classmate who'd used ChatGPT. "Part

of me is able to compartmentalize and not be pissed about it,"

he said. "I developed myself as a human. I can have a superiority complex about it. I learned more." He smiled. But then he

continued, "Part of me can also be, like, This is so unfair. I would have loved to hang out with my friends more. What did I gain?

I made my life harder for all that time."

In my conversations, just as college students invariably thought

of ChatGPT as merely another tool, people older than forty

focussed on its effects, drawing a comparison to G.P.S. and the erosion of our relationship to space. The London cabdrivers rigorously trained in “the knowledge” famously developed abnormally large posterior hippocampi, the part of the brain

crucial for long-term memory and spatial awareness. And yet,

in the end, most people would probably rather have swifter travel than sharper memories. What is worth preserving, and what do we feel comfortable off-loading in the name of efficiency?

What if we take seriously the idea that A.I. assistance can accelerate learning—that students today are arriving at their destinations

faster? In 2023, researchers at Harvard introduced a self-paced A.I. tutor in a popular physics course. Students who used the A.I. tutor reported higher levels of engagement and motivation and did

better on a test than those who were learning from a professor.

May, the Georgetown student, told me that she often has ChatGPT produce extra practice questions when she’s studying for a test.

Could A.I. be here not to destroy education but to revolutionize it? Barry Lam teaches in the philosophy department at the University

of California, Riverside, and hosts a popular podcast, Hi-Phi

Nation, which applies philosophical modes of inquiry to everyday topics. He began wondering what it would mean for A.I. to

actually be a productivity tool. He spoke to me from the podcast studio he built in his shed. “Now students are able to generate in

thirty seconds what used to take me a week,” he said. He

compared education to carpentry, one of his many hobbies. Could

you skip to using power tools without learning how to saw by

hand? If students were learning things faster, then it stood to reason that Lam could assign them “something very hard.” He wanted to

test this theory, so for final exams he gave his undergraduates a Ph.D.-level question involving denotative language and the

German logician Gottlob Frege which was, frankly, beyond me.

“They fucking failed it miserably,” he said. He adjusted his grading curve accordingly.

Lam doesn’t find the use of A.I. morally indefensible. “It’s not plagiarism in the cut-and-paste sense,” he argued, because there’s technically no original version. Rather, he finds it a potential waste

of everyone’s time. At the start of the semester, he has told students, “If you’re gonna just turn in a paper that’s ChatGPT-generated, then

I will grade all your work by ChatGPT and we can all go to the beach.”

Nobody gets into teaching because he loves grading papers. I talked to one professor who rhapsodized about how much more his

students were learning now that he’d replaced essays with short exams. I asked if he missed marking up essays. He laughed and

said, “No comment.” An undergraduate at Northeastern

University recently accused a professor of using A.I. to create

course materials; she filed a formal complaint with the school, requesting a refund for some of her tuition. The dustup laid bare

the tension between why many people go to college and why professors teach. Students are raised to understand achievement

as something discrete and measurable, but when they arrive at college there are people like me, imploring them to wrestle with difficulty and abstraction. Worse yet, they are told that grades

don’t matter as much as they did when they were trying to get

into college—only, by this point, students are wired to find the

most efficient path possible to good marks.

As the craft of writing is degraded by A.I., original writing has become a valuable resource for training language models. Earlier

this year, a company called Catalyst Research Alliance

advertised “academic speech data and student papers” from

two research studies run in the late nineties and mid-two-

thousands at the University of Michigan. The school asked the company to halt its work—the data was available for free to academics anyway—and a university spokesperson said that

student data “was not and has never been for sale.” But the

situation did lead many people to wonder whether institutions

would begin viewing original student work as a potential

revenue stream.

According to a recent study from the Organisation for Economic

Co-operation and Development, human intellect has declined

since 2012. An assessment of tens of thousands of adults in

nearly thirty countries showed an over-all decade-long drop

in test scores for math and for reading comprehension. Andreas Schleicher, the director for education and skills at the

O.E.C.D., hypothesized that the way we consume information today—often through short social-media posts—has something

to do with the decline in literacy. (One of Europe's top performers

in the assessment was Estonia, which recently announced that it

will bring A.I. to some high-school students in the next few years, sidelining written essays and rote homework exercises in favor of self-directed learning and oral exams.)

Lam, the philosophy professor, used to be a colleague of mine,

and for a brief time we were also neighbors. I'd occasionally look

out the window and see him building a fence, or gardening. He's

an avid amateur cook, guitarist, and carpenter, and he remains convinced that there is value to learning how to do things the annoying, old-fashioned, and—as he puts it—"artisanal" way.

He told me that his wife, Shanna Andrawis, who has been a high-school teacher since 2008, frequently disagreed with his cavalier methods for dealing with large learning models. Andrawis argues

that dishonesty has always been an issue. “We are trying to mass educate,” she said, meaning there’s less room to be precious about

the pedagogical process. “I don’t have conversations with students about ‘artisanal’ writing. But I have conversations with them about our relationship. Respect me enough to give me your authentic

voice, even if you don’t think it’s that great. It’s O.K. I want to

meet you where you’re at.”

Ultimately, Andrawis was less fearful of ChatGPT than of the

broader conditions of being young these days. Her students

have grown increasingly introverted, staring at their phones with

little desire to “practice getting over that awkwardness” that

defines teen life, as she put it. A.I. might contribute to this deterioration, but it isn’t solely to blame. It’s “a little cherry on

top of an already really bad ice-cream sundae,” she said.

When the school year began, my feelings about ChatGPT

were somewhere between disappointment and disdain,

focussed mainly on students. But, as the weeks went by,

my sense of what should be done and who was at fault grew

hazier. Eliminating core requirements, rethinking G.P.A.,

teaching A.I. skepticism—none of the potential fixes could

turn back the preconditions of American youth. Professors

can reconceive of the classroom, but there is only so much we

control. I lacked faith that educational institutions would ever

regard new technologies as anything but inevitable. Colleges

and universities, many of which had tried to curb A.I. use just

a few semesters ago, rushed to partner with companies like

OpenAI and Anthropic, deeming a product that didn’t exist

four years ago essential to the future of school.

Except for a year spent bumming around my home town,

I’ve basically been on a campus for the past thirty years.

Students these days view college as consumers, in ways

that never would have occurred to me when I was their age.

They've grown up at a time when society values high-speed

takes, not the slow deliberation of critical thinking. Although

I've empathized with my students' various mini-dramas,

I rarely project myself into their lives. I notice them noticing

one another, and I let the mysteries of their lives go. Their

pressures are so different from the ones I felt as a student.

Although I envy their metabolisms, I would not wish for their

sense of horizons.

Education, particularly in the humanities, rests on a belief that, alongside the practical things students might retain, some arcane

idea mentioned in passing might take root in their mind,

blossoming years in the future. A.I. allows any of us to feel

like an expert, but it is risk, doubt, and failure that make us

human. I often tell my students that this is the last time in

their lives that someone will have to read something they

write, so they might as well tell me what they actually think.

Despite all the current hysteria around students cheating,

they aren’t the ones to blame. They did not lobby for the

introduction of laptops when they were in elementary school,

and it’s not their fault that they had to go to school on Zoom

during the pandemic. They didn’t create the A.I. tools, nor

were they at the forefront of hyping technological innovation.

They were just early adopters, trying to outwit the system at

a time when doing so has never been so easy. And they have

no more control than the rest of us. Perhaps they sense this powerlessness even more acutely than I do. One moment,

they are being told to learn to code; the next, it turns out

employers are looking for the kind of “soft skills” one might

learn as an English or a philosophy major. In February, a

labor report from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York

reported that computer-science majors had a higher

unemployment rate than ethnic-studies majors did—the result,

some believed, of A.I. automating entry-level coding jobs.

None of the students I spoke with seemed lazy or passive.

Alex and Eugene, the N.Y.U. students, worked hard—but part

of their effort went to editing out anything in their college

experiences that felt extraneous. They were radically

resourceful.

When classes were over and students were moving into their

summer housing, I e-mailed with Alex, who was settling in in

the East Village. He’d just finished his finals, and estimated that

he’d spent between thirty minutes and an hour composing two

papers for his humanities classes. Without the assistance of

Claude, it might have taken him around eight or nine hours.

“I didn’t retain anything,” he wrote. “I couldn’t tell you the

thesis for either paper hahhahaha.” He received an A-minus

and a B-plus. ♦

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